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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NASSAU 000282

SIPDIS

WHA/PD FOR CHAD WEST, WHA/CAR FOR ANDRE CADIEUX

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KPAO BF

SUBJECT: TURKS AND CAICOS: BLOGGER ACCUSES COAST GUARD OF ENDANGERING MIGRANTS

¶1. (U) A blogger in the Turks and Caicos (TCI) posted an on-line report April 27 alleging that the TCI authorities, assisted by a U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) helicopter, were engaged in "burning and smoking immigrants out of the 'bush'" during an immigration raid. The blogger witnessed the events and alleged that "human rights violations" were perpetrated against the illegal migrants sheltering in the area during the operation. Photos of a USCG helicopter hovering over green areas amid smoke or dust clouds were attached. The blog is located at www.tcijournal.com.

¶2. (U) The USCG immediately initiated a review of the incident to include interviews with the aircrew involved. USCG District 7 Headquarters determined that the helicopter was acting within USCG procedures and at no time was attempting to "burn or smoke out" migrants. The USCG further determined that no individuals, TCI security forces, or USCG personal were at risk during their operations. The USCG role was to provide airborne observation assistance to TCI law enforcement operations.

¶3. (U) USCG PAO issued a response (para. 4) which was published on the blog site on April 30. USCG PAO shared their response with Embassy Public Affairs but did not accept cleared language. Prior to releasing their response USCG officials also shared the statement with TCI Governor Gorden Wetherell, who included portions of the response in his public statement. To date no other media outlets have run the story and there has been no public response in TCI to the original post.

¶4. (U) Full Text of USCG Response:

Mr. Berke -

In response to your article in the TCI Journal, "Burning Down the Bush," I would like to clarify the U.S. Coast Guard's role in a joint mission with the Turks and Caicos government to apprehend undocumented migrants living illegally in the Blue Hills and Five Keys area. First, please allow me to provide some background that may help to provide insight into the Coast Guard's interest in this mission.

The U.S. government and Coast Guard have a long-standing relationship with the Government of the Turks and Caicos and the Coast Guard has been operating under the OPBAT program, which is a Tri-country agreement between the United States, the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos for more than twenty years on law enforcement issues of mutual interest. The Coast Guard routinely supports law enforcement requests from the Turks and Caicos government due to the limited number of surface and air assets in the region.

The Turks and Caicos police requested Coast Guard assistance in a mission they were conducting to apprehend illegal migrants in the Blue Hills and Five Keys areas. This operation had been ongoing for several days when you saw the Coast Guard helicopter hovering overhead the Blue Hills area.

The Coast Guard's role in this mission was not, as you stated, to "burn or smoke immigrants out of the bush." At no time did a Coast Guard helicopter intentionally fan flames, redirect smoke or lower the aircraft to stir up debris or launch projectiles into the air with its tail rotor.

Although it may have been difficult to discern from your vantage point, what you witnessed was a Coast Guard helicopter being utilized as a "spotter" for immigration officials on the ground. The helicopter did vary its altitude between 50 and 100 feet to provide the best line of sight into the area and communicate with immigration officials on the ground via hand signal. In no way was the safety of the illegal migrants, immigration officials or the Coast Guard helicopter crew in jeopardy nor were there any injuries to any individuals involved. A significant amount of the smoke that you witnessed was from "ash piles" created when illegal migrant shanties were burned by Turks and Caicos officials days earlier. The Coast Guard had no role in this aspect of the mission and thus cannot comment on it.

If you have further questions on the U.S. Coast Guard's role in illegal migrant operations with the Government of Turks and Caicos, please feel free to contact me at matthew.j.moorlag@uscg.mil or (305) 415-7153.

Respectfully,

LT Matthew Moorlag
U.S. Coast Guard
Public Affairs Officer
Seventh Coast Guard District

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END TEXT.

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